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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (J. MUDGE), DRL/PHD (C. KUCHTA-HELBLING), AND
DRL/CRA (E. RAMBORGER)

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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT NAZARBAYEV CONVENES DEMOCRATIZATION COMMISSION

REF: ALMATY 1095

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: On March 24, President Nazarbayev chaired the first meeting of the Democratization Commission in Astana. All registered political parties were invited to send representatives, except the recently-registered opposition party True Ak Zhol. Most opposition representatives did not attend, however. Nazarbayev laid out priority issues for the Commission to address, including strengthening the legislative branch, tackling corruption, and creating greater government transparency. Based on press accounts, it appears that other participants were not given the opportunity to speak during the opening session. Nazarbayev appointed State Secretary Oralbay Abdykarimov as his deputy, to deal with day-to-day management of the Commission staff and to organize periodic meetings in Astana and the regions. END SUMMARY

SCOPE AND COMPOSITION OF THE COMMISSION

¶2. (SBU) On March 24, President Nazarbayev chaired the long-awaited first meeting of the Democratization Commission in Astana, formally known as the "State Commission on Drafting and Elaborating the Democratic Reform Program." The government invited representatives from registered opposition movement For A Just Kazakhstan (FJK) and from 11 of 12 currently registered political parties: the Agrarian Party, Ak Zhol, Asar, Aul, the Civic Party, the Communist Party of Kazakhstan (CPK), the Communist People's Party of Kazakhstan (CPPK), the Democratic Party of Kazakhstan (DPK), Otan, the Patriot Party, and Rukhaniyat. Commission staff reported that although True Ak Zhol was registered on March 21, the Commission was not able to prepare an invitation for the party in time. Of the invited opposition groups, only Ak Zhol's Baimenov participated; the Communist party and For a Just Kazakhstan declined. (Reftel reports their reasons, primarily unresolved questions about the Sarsenbailuly murder and the structure and true purpose of the Commission.) Most parties sent their chairmen as representatives. Asar leader Dariga Nazarbayeva did not attend, however, sending another party leader in her place. Nazarbayev, the chairman of the Commission, appointed State Secretary Oralbay Abdykarimov as his deputy. Abdykarimov is to hold periodic meetings of the Commission, to organize its meetings in the regions, and to deal with routine issues of the Commission. Nazarbayev did not indicate how frequently he planned to participate in future meetings.

13. (U) In his opening remarks, President Nazarbayev outlined his priorities for democratic development: strong basic political institutions; effective interaction among the branches of government; public accountability for government operations; a strong, independent Parliament; and a more active role for political parties. Nazarbayev acknowledged that the government should report to the people and that corruption within the government remains a problem. Nazarbayev said that the structure of executive power should be changed to provide for greater public accountability of government agencies and institutions. Implementation of e-government could become a tool to reduce corruption and increase transparency and access to services. Nazarbayev said that democratic reforms should move forward in spite of any internal threats or social conflicts.

STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENT

14. (U) Reiterating themes he has raised over the past year, Nazarbayev asked the Commission to strengthen the role of Parliament and increase the independence and accountability of local governments. Parliament should participate in the formation of the cabinet, which is currently chosen by the President. Nazarbayev asked the Commission to consider increasing the number of parliamentarians in both chambers, a change that would require a constitutional amendment. He stated that the administration is preparing a draft law, "On Local Self-government," that is expected to be presented to the Parliament in the next few months. Nazarbayev also noted that preparations are underway for the election of district (raiyn) akims this year; currently, district akims are selected by the President or by the akim of the oblast, the intermediate administrative level of government.

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MANAGED CHANGE

15. (U) Nazarbayev also returned to his often-expressed mantra that social reforms and the construction of a democratic society must take into account "our traditional values." Liberalization of the political system should be balanced with the efficiency of the government. He reiterated concerns that economic development and prosperity should not be overrun by democratic changes. "The world has witnessed more than one incident when 'recipes' were automatically planted in unprepared soil and yielded results contrary to those expected," warned Nazarbayev. He cited India, Brazil, and Argentina as examples of countries widely recognized as democratic, but where a substantial part of the population suffers from poverty. Other countries seen as far from democratic, such as China and the nations of Southeast Asia, had managed to achieve rapid economic growth and prosperity. "It is to the experience of these latter countries that we often refer," added Nazarbayev.

16. (U) Based on press accounts, it appears that the other participants were not given the opportunity to speak during the opening session. Kazakhstani human rights defender Yevgeniy Zhovtis strongly criticized the format of the Commission in public comments on March 27. Zhovtis called for all political forces to be invited, including opposition parties, influential social organizations, and prominent public figures. Underscoring Nazarbayev's responsibility to work with all citizens, not just those who voted for him, Zhovtis called for true dialogue and a search for compromise. He rejected a majority voting approach.

NEXT STEPS

17. (U) The President tasked his administration with preparing a work schedule for the Commission within a month. The Cabinet

will provide the Commission's operating budget, which will be administered by the Ministry of Culture, Information and Sports. (Note: This ministry was split into two new ministries on March 27: the Ministry of Culture and Information and the Ministry of Tourism and Sport. Although it has not been announced, the Ministry of Culture and Information is expected to assume budgetary responsibility for the Commission. End note.)

¶8. (U) On March 28, Deputy Chair Oralbay Abdykarimov held a press briefing in Almaty to elaborate on plans for addressing the priority issues identified by Nazarbayev. Underscoring the importance of consistency in political reforms, he stated, "There should be no haste in making changes in the Constitution. The Commission should begin with changes in those laws that do not require amendments into the Constitution." According to Abdykarimov, he invited all members of the Commission to send proposals for prioritization of those political reforms that the President had outlined. Prioritization of reform was crucial to the Commission's success, Abdykarimov noted, citing the experience of the previous Democracy Commission, which put together a program of political reforms with seven major directions, "but if we move in all (these) directions simultaneously we will bring the country to chaos."

¶9. (U) In response to a question, Abdykarimov told the press that all political parties were invited to the first meeting of the Commission, except opposition party True Ak Zhol, which he said was not formally registered until the day before the meeting of the Commission. Abdykarimov stated that True Ak Zhol would be invited to join the Commission and send representatives to all future meetings. Abdykarimov also commented that though unregistered political movements cannot participate formally in the Commission, they are free to contribute their proposals on various issues related to political reforms.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: Nazarbayev has laid out an ambitious agenda for the Democratization Commission. Engaging the opposition in the work of the Commission, particularly in the wake of the Sarsenbaily murder, is a must, and will be a challenge. Abdykarimov's promise to include True Ak Zhol in future meetings and his offer to accept contributions from unregistered political movements may provide an opening for small

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confidence-building steps that Post will encourage all parties to pursue. The key to the organization's success or failure will be whether organizers can convince participants that it is a forum where they can express their views and be heard publicly, not just a venue for Nazarbayev photo ops. END COMMENT.
TRACY